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can't help lovin'
that man

STEVEN COHAN

Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical

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When I was a boy, sitting cross-legged on the floor of my family's working-class suburban home watching *Singin' in the Rain*, I wanted to be Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds. I thought that being Donald O'Connor occasionally might be nice too. I watched this film and many other MGM musicals with my parents who, in the early 1970s had a very different relationship to them than the one I was developing. Their relationship to these films mediated and shaped mine in ways I cannot easily re-imagine but which feel, in my body, muscles, breath and viscera like the foundations of the sissy boy I am today. It was with great pleasure that I read Steven Cohan's *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*, a book that, like his other publications on the musical genre, mediates, shapes and challenges our relationships to this form of popular entertainment. Cohan's critical and analytical work, exemplary in its systematicity and thoroughness, is matched by an extraordinary depth of research and the knowledge that years of engagement with a field can yield.

For Cohan, the MGM musical is a form of camp that allows these films and their viewers to live ambiguity and contradiction, having it both ways by coupling critique through the defamiliarisation of normative gender and sexuality with, at times, an unbridled indulgence in the sentimentality invoked by norms made possible by recycling and reworking. Cohan does what he estimates is at the core of the MGM musical's incongruity: he recycles, re-works, re-imagines and re-loves these films, enjoying the nostalgia at the same time as enlivening critique. That Cohan does what he

claims is at the heart of the MGM musical's incongruous entertainment is a strength of this book and, I will suggest later in this review, a point of critique that offers the chance to take critical engagement with the musical form further, beyond camp into something possibly more challenging.

Being Judy Garland would be good too. Cohan's introduction provides an analysis of Judy Garland's performance of 'The Man That Got Away', and it is, as a model for the book's method and critique, one of his loveliest analyses. This scene from *A Star is Born* in which Garland sings 'The Man That Got Away' is quintessential Garland. Cohan suggests that it is the 'dialectical positioning of Garland/ Esther's engagement with and distance from the number' that is 'the source of its powerful camp effect'. (26) Using Babuscio's insights, Cohan argues that it is camp's awareness of the double aspect of performance whereby theatricality is what is authentic that makes Garland's performance of this song camp: it embodies 'a performance style that theatricalizes transparency and then naturalizes the theatricality'. (26) Cohan demonstrates through a close analysis of the film text that Garland/Esther, singing a very sad and tragic number 'spontaneously' (this appears to be the first time she has sung this song), is not simply performing the song as her character Esther but also performs an authentication of her own, that is Garland's own star qualities of intensity, intimacy, and expressiveness, (24) foregrounding the film text, her role and life text as 'star', while at the same time working back into the narrative of *A Star is Born* the content and style of all of

these. The art is apparently artless but the extra-film content used to make sense of the number renders the scene aware of its own absurdity and, crucially, this is part of its pleasure and an essential part of the critique it offers. Cohan, citing Cleto, augments camp, pushing camp as a queer articulation (27)—that is, an articulation that 'puzzles' by sustaining contradictions and crossings, sustaining any foreclosure to sure knowledge about how, why or with what effect the number makes its meaning. 'The Man That Got Away' is a queer articulation, through camp, because 'the number is performed, staged, and filmed so as to allow Garland/Esther's singing to be legible as authentic and theatrical at the same time; the number cannot be reduced to either style or content but builds on their tension'. (27) In other words, either side of the duality authenticity/theatricality 'passes' as the other: 'Theatricality is authenticity in this number and vice versa'. (28)

Cohan also offers, on his way to an analysis of 'The Trolley Song' (*Meet Me In St. Louis* 1944), a description of Garland's performance of 'The Man that Got Away', citing James Mason's character Norman Maine as containing 'something extra', (29) accounting for the 'intense-jabbing, jolting-pleasure' that produces 'the authentication of her star quality, not of her [character's] heartbreak'. (29) Cohan attributes this 'something extra' to the camp effect of the number and this surely is, as his analysis shows, a central mechanism to the unstable and interchanging foregroundings of Judy as 'star' and Esther. I also think it is useful to signal here that the exuberance and excess (emotional, embodied and film-textual) which

Garland performs is also the excess of a feminine embodiment which *embraces as it exceeds* the normative bounds of the feminine as masculinity's (constitutive) other, making Garland's alterity a mesmerising, potentially shameful and disruptively rich masquerade of femininity. I want to revisit this point later in considering the somewhat overlooked queerness of Cosmo/Donald O'Connor in Cohan's analysis of *Singin' in the Rain*.

For Cohan, *Singin' in the Rain* is a pivotal text—he returns again and again to the film as a core instance of the mass recycling that both stabilised and destabilised MGM's history, its fictions and the fictions that it offered in the narratives it presented in musical form throughout the early to mid twentieth century. According to Cohan, *Singin' in the Rain* 'aesthetically recreates the movie musical's past, sending it up as "camp," in order to promote "cultist" taste for the genre in the present as a self-reflexive yet entertaining popular art form'. (207) Centring the film as 'discursive production' rather than industrial object production (here, Cohan is using Meyer's camp distinction), *Singin' in the Rain* gives its own version of 'the silent film's demise', weaving its distorted, campily unstable revision of film history into an attempt to renew/create anew a taste for and valuing of the genre whose popularity, as Cohan points out, was about to wane. (210) Cohan's argument and the analysis that supports it extend beyond and augment the cultural recycling and its instabilities in mass-camp. For example, central to *Singin' in the Rain* is the reuse of songs from other, earlier films. Cohan describes this process as 'old songs acquiring mass-camp value

insofar as their currency has been enhanced through their recycling *and* it has been done with full awareness of how surplus features of stylistic, choreographic, and generic innovations cancel out their obsolescence'. (227) This camp recycling takes place in a film narrative about a silent star, Lina Lamont (Jean Hagan), whose speaking voice could cut tin and who can't sing a note. She is the self-interested villain of the piece to be sure, but, Cohan argues, she also occupies a 'resistant camp' position because her character summons the very parody-based, self-aware appropriation which underpins almost all of the MGM musical catalogue. As Cohan explains: Lina's figure 'puts the most overt pressure on the appropriation of other people's talent within *Singin' in the Rain* and the equally dubious "theft" of the "original" sources comprising this film's extra-filmic referential field as the basis of mass-camp recycling of MGM's musical history'. (243) This kind of camp 'keeps pointing toward the collaborative labor behind the production of a musical, which exposes traces of an industrial history which the mass-camp recycling "forgets"'. (243) Cohan applies this interpretation and its destabilising effect to dependence on aspects of racial and sexual appropriation erased in the continued value of *Singin' in the Rain* (243–45). These appropriations of, for example, black or queer, are contained in what Cohan describes as a 'hierarchy centering on the straight white male star, Don Lockwood [Gene Kelly]'. (241) Don is the ultimate hero of the film, establishing both a successful career and making a love match with Kathy, Debbie Reynolds, who is revealed as the 'real' voice of Lina, the real

talent and Don's true love in the film's climax. Kathy/Debbie Reynolds is as 'authentic' as singing, dancing American girls can get but not even she sings all her own numbers in this film. Again, Cohan reveals and revels in the way the film and its production cut against their own authenticity by valuing the mechanisms of theatricality.

Cohan pays great attention to Gene Kelly and his work in MGM musicals, signalling an intense cathexis. Cohan argues that Kelly's performances sustain a camp because they stage a manufactured solution to Kelly's 'unstable masculinity'. The instability of Kelly's masculinity is wrought by his work as a dancer. Ultimately, Cohan concludes that 'the dialectical tension between what counts as straight pleasures in the musicals' entertainment and what counts as queer ones still makes their camp attractions disarming and disturbing'. To this end, Cohan urges the reader 'to think more queerly about the MGM musical's cultural significance as camp; and to think more queerly ... is to think about incongruous entertainment more historically and critically as well.' (243) To outline a limitation to Cohan's work in *Incongruous Entertainment*, I'd like to look closely at the relationship between Kelly and O'Connor/Lockwood and Cosmo.

A key piece of not so subtle appropriation in the film is one of the songs Cosmo (Donald O'Connor), Don Lockwood's sidekick sings, 'Make em Laugh'. The song itself is a piece of extraordinary plagiarism, being very close to Cole Porter's 'Be a Clown'. (235) O'Connor performs this number with what Cohan describes as 'athletic clowning' (189) and Cohan suggests

that his dancing is 'not encoded as "sissy" dancing'. Cohan also cites Alexander Doty who, in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, describes the number as 'a case of overwrought, displaced gay desire' (Cohan 189).¹ Though O'Connor's dancing is not 'sissy' (perhaps, in not being 'girly'), it is excessive, as is Cosmo's involvement and facilitation of Don as 'star', the studio's transition into sound, the writing of the diegetic musical text, Don and Kathy's love match and the exposure of Lina/Hagan as the great impostor. Donald O'Connor/Cosmo acts as a sissy: he is the excessive *and* facilitative outsider to masculinity (its relational construction of and pursuit of the feminine) who bears the invisible responsibility for constructing the script, writing the songs. He is also, I will suggest, a very camp/queer element of the film overlooked by Cohan.

Throughout this review, I have foregrounded my own projective/introjective identifications and desires. This avowal augments the kinds of desires that ripple through Cohan's book—he re-loves, re-imagines and reworks MGM's musicals and the extraordinary extra-filmic content with which he engages. The camp theatricalisation with which he loves these films is underscored throughout by a desiring attachment to the kinds of masculinity reproduced in the films, especially Gene Kelly's much worked-for version of the authentically masculine. Cohan is right, I think, in suggesting that Kelly does this to ward off the perpetual threat to his masculinity via his performances and status as a dancer. Cohan's development of camp (following Meyer) connects queerness to camp through the idea of gay men's sexual

orientation, suggesting that queer sexuality's constitutive negotiations enliven a camp sensibility oriented to a loving awareness of authenticities which depend on theatricalisations. Sedgwick, in her considerations of queer, offers perhaps a more challenging and more dangerous impetus to queer when she suggests that 'queerness and disavowal don't belong in the same grammar'.²

From the opening sequences of *Singin' in the Rain*, Donald O'Connor/Cosmo ironises and comments on, through loving critique, the lack of authenticity in the central 'myths' of the film (Don Lockwood/Kelly as 'authentic' and Lockwood and Lamont as the that which needs saving or protecting). His outsider status (as not-so-masculine, romantically unrealised, as providing 'mood' music for the production of love, of providing 'truth' within and around fiction) is the position of a camp outsider. That which he works so strategically and in an under-recognised way to support is both the authenticity of the theatrical elements of the film, its work as a 'history' of the MGM musical and the action and validity of the male hero built through layers of romance (Don to Lina/Don to Kathy) and, most crucially, Cosmo works tirelessly to keep the troublesome feminine figure (Lina) silent and to allow the 'authentic', less troublesome feminine figure, Kathy/Reynolds to speak and sing. In a world where a lot of strategic disavowal is going on, O'Connor/Cosmo simultaneously works to shore up the masculine (embodied by Kelly) within its idealised and idealising framework of romantic union with the feminine *and* he works to undermine its authenticating fiction.

In the 'Make 'em Laugh' scene, Cosmo/O'Connor channels Ethel Merman, suggesting that the 'show must go on' through the continued reproduction of the core fictions of masculinity and heterosexual romance. I suggest that Cohan's critical work could be more dangerous if the question of such normalising reproduction was seen more clearly to be possible only through the silence and disavowal of what precedes and exceeds it—a desire to keep lively and real the authenticated masculinity at the heart of heterosexual masculinity's claim to authenticity and its value as an object/ideal of desire. Donald (O'Connor) is Don(al) Lockwood's (Kelly's) other *other*—the other that is not feminine but that is not quite masculine enough to be the ideal. He performs desires as a less-than-masculine figure which keeps 'real' masculinity in circulation so that 'real' heterosexuality can continue its claim to normal and disavow its origins in theatricality. As an other he has a key constitutive role in this authentication process and the capacity to see and speak the strategic silences that make the masculine possible. Whilst Cohan's analysis, research and insight are broad, deep and campy, critically, effective, an embrace and engagement of the disavowals that underpin masculinity might offer more critical insight and push camp into the territory signalled by Cohan in his conclusion:

Camp nonetheless continues to be an assertion of a dialectical resistance to the hegemony of straight thinking and, I myself cannot resist saying, it means to be dangerous when (the wit) is whet. (339)

It is very difficult to do justice to an engaging piece of scholarship such as Steven Cohan's *Incongruous Entertainment* in a brief review. The small, cross-legged sissy boy and his older academic counterpart appreciate the depth of insight and challenge to normative narratives provided by Cohan's loving embrace of incongruity and the chance to reconsider the MGM musical.

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1. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 11.
 2. E.K. Sedgwick in interview with Mark Kerr and Kristin O'Rourke, 'Sedgwick Sense and Sensibility: an Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick', <<http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/~nideffer/Tvc/interviews/20.Tvc.v9.intrvws.Sedg.html>>.